HEY, GOOD-'LOOKING': MEET FRANKIE J. ALVAREZ

THE ACTOR'S FIRST ON-SCREEN ROLE ISN'T PLAYING THE STRAIGHT MAN. PAGE 13

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City's goal: No more traffic fatalities

Epidemic. The city unveiled the "Vision Zero" initiative on Wednesday with the aim to eliminate deaths from traffic accidents within 10 years. **Safety.** The NYPD will immediately enforce limits near speed cameras. PAGE 02

Indie films to look out for after Sundance

PAGE 10

To get dirty in bed, your room must be clean

PAGE 14

New in the new year: Metro's winter dining guide

EAT IT WHILE IT'S HOT

PAGES 15-16

Whether you've got a client, date or mom to impress, we've got the best picks for the restaurants everyone will swoon over. You'll make your posse jealous when you check in on Foursquare. / QUENTIN BACON, THE SMITH

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1 NEWS

City has a 'Vision Zero' after pedestrian deaths

Safety. Initiatives aim to eliminate pedestrian and traffic deaths.

Mayor Bill de Blasio pauses in front of a traffic memorial for Noshat Nahian, 8, who was killed on the way to school. / ROB BENNETT, OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

Less than a month after an 8-year-old pedestrian was struck crossing Northern Boulevard in Queens, his family returned to the dangerous intersection where he was killed to support new traffic safety initiatives.

"I am very happy," Nargish Begum said Wednesday, her eyes filling with tears. She stood in the school grounds just feet from where her son, Noshat Nahian, was hit by a tractor trailer on his way to class Dec. 20.

Holding a picture of Noshat, Begum silently cried as Mayor Bill de Blasio unveiled initiatives aimed at eliminating traffic fatalities in 10 years.

"It is incredibly painful to hear the stories of these families and what they've gone through," de Blasio said.

Through the "Vision Zero" initiative, the city hopes to entirely eliminate deadly crashes, particularly those involving pedestrians. A plan to implement this vision will be developed in the next month by a task force with officials from the transportation and health departments, the Taxi & Limousine Commission and the NYPD.

The group will explore means of improving 50 dangerous intersections, increasing 20 mph zones and investing in driver education. A traffic safety agenda will be pursued in the state legislature.

Audrey Anderson, whose 14-year-old son Andre was struck and killed will riding his bike in 2005, said the plans were "a step in the right direction." She is still concerned about defining criminality in incidents of reckless driving.

After police said Mauricio Osorio-Palominos hit Noshat, the Newark, N.J., resident was charged with aggravated unlicensed operation of a motor vehicle, a misdemeanor.

Afsana Choudhury, a friend of Noshat's family, said Begum was appreciative of de Blasio's efforts.

"She's happy the mayor came and that they're going to take an action so that other kids can be safe," said Choudhury, speaking on behalf of Begum.

The devastated mother said little Wednesday.

"Noshat is very loved," Begum said simply.

ANNA SANDERS
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Vision Zero

Immediate steps to be taken by the city:

- De Blasio will meet with victims' families in coming weeks to work for the "Vision Zero" plan.
- Tickets will be issued to enforce limits near recently-installed speed cameras.
- Police will move to increase the Highway Division by 50 percent.

Priority

"This is an effort that the mayor has prioritized. ... A life lost is a life lost, whether by murder or traffic accident."
NYPD Commissioner Bill Bratton

NYC ready to tackle the Super Bowl

Weeks before the big game, New York officials said the city is prepared to tackle security for Super Bowl events.

"I'm very comfortable on everything I've been briefed on, that we are, in fact, going to have a safe and secure event, not only here but certainly at the game itself," Police Commissioner Bill Bratton said Wednesday.

For four days leading up to the Feb. 2 game, the city will host a "Super Bowl Boulevard" with free football-themed activities on Broadway from 34th to 47th streets.

Big game

"The only thing up in the air right now is the weather."
Bill Bratton

Bratton said that police, along with other city, state and federal agencies involved in the planning, will have several discussions in the next weeks to ensure that every group is up to speed.

Mayor Bill de Blasio praised Bratton and his team, along with former top cop Ray Kelly and his team, on prepping the city for the Super Bowl.

ANNA SANDERS

The city will host a "Super Bowl Boulevard" in the days before the game. / GETTY IMAGES

Top 3

What's trending at Metro.us

1 'VIDEO: Bruce Springsteen joins Jimmy Fallon to address Bridgegate'

2 'VIDEO: Peter Pan actor proposes to Wendy during live show'

3 'VIDEO: Macklemore and Ryan Lewis perform 'Can't Hold Us' on MTA bus'

Quoted

"I'm filled with joy and gratitude about what was able to be accomplished by so many five years ago today and the fact that all 155 passengers and crew are here today because of it."
Captain Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger remembers the "Miracle on the Hudson."

Tracks. Derailment caused $9 million in damage: NTSB report

A New York commuter train derailment that killed four people in December caused more than $9 million in damage, the National Transportation Safety Board said.

A preliminary report that was issued on Tuesday by the federal agency found that the train's signal system, brakes and other mechanical equipment were functioning normally when all seven of its cars derailed in the Bronx.

The finding may bolster allegations that train engineer William Rockefeller, 46, was to blame for the crash. Investigators say Rockefeller told them he "zoned out" as the train sped through a curve at 82 mph, nearly three times the speed limit.

The crash also critically injured 75 of the 115 people on board and snarled travel for the roughly 26,000 regular commuters on the Metro-North Hudson line, which serves suburbs north of New York City.

The report could be instrumental in determining whether the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the parent of Metro-North, will be held liable for the crash, legal experts said. **REUTERS**

Coming to light

The report found that the mechanical equipment on the train was working properly.

- It also reportedly adds to evidence that the crash was caused by human error.
- The MTA could still be held liable for the negligence of its employees, experts said.

'Miracle on the Hudson' remembered

Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger, a retired airline captain famous for landing US Airways 1549, a commercial jet, on the Hudson River, hugs a passenger from the flight on Wednesday afternoon in New York City on the fifth anniversary of the crash. No passengers were killed in the emergency landing. The accident happened when the plane struck a flock of geese. / GETTY IMAGES

Manhattan

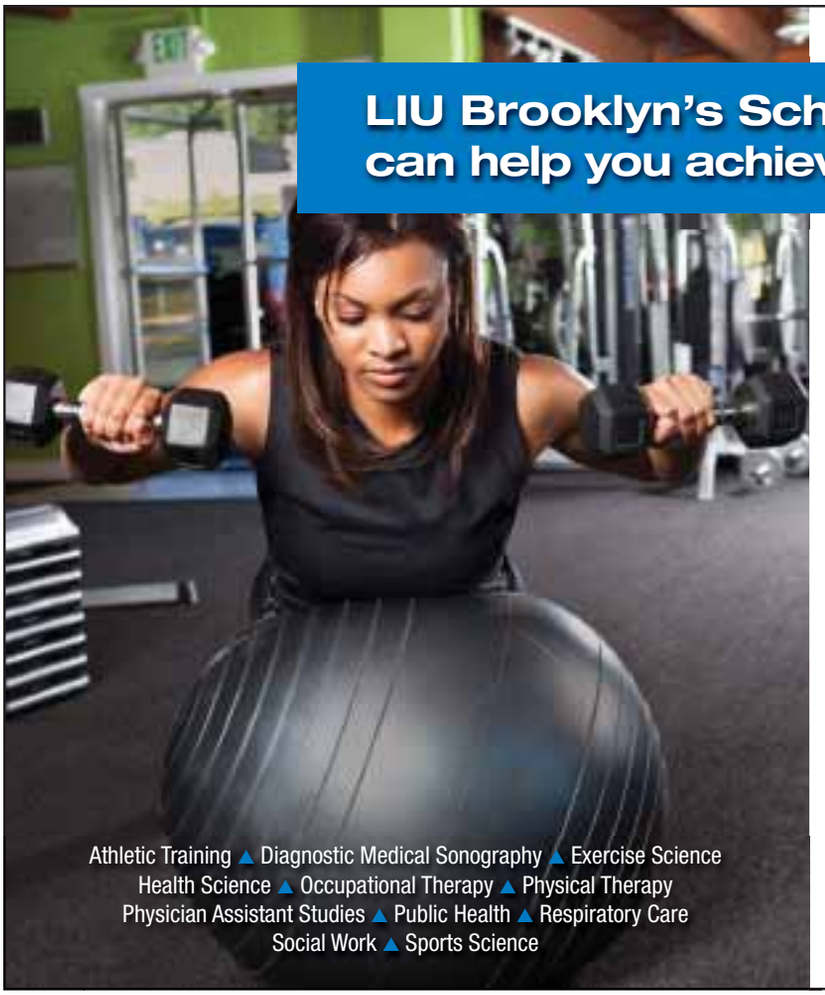
Cops seek man in rape attempt

Police are searching for a man in connection with an attempted rape case in Upper Manhattan.

The female victim, 36, was exiting the subway station at 110th Street and Cathedral Parkway about 3:30 p.m. on Jan. 4, police said. The suspect approached the woman from behind and pulled her pants down. The victim began to scream and the suspect fled.

Police said that the man is described as being 35 years old, 6 feet tall and 250 pounds. He was last seen wearing a black cap, black sneakers and a waist-length black jacket.

Anyone with information can call the NYPD's Crime Stoppers hotline: 800-577-TIPS. **LAURA SHIN**



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Investigation

Police hunt suspect in Queens shooting

Police are on the lookout for a suspect in a Queens shooting that took place Sunday morning.

The man is suspected of shooting a 25-year-old man in the left shoulder after a verbal dispute broke out between the two on Guy Brewer Avenue in Jamaica about 6 a.m., police said.

The suspect / NYPD

The man then fled in a black Infinity Q32.

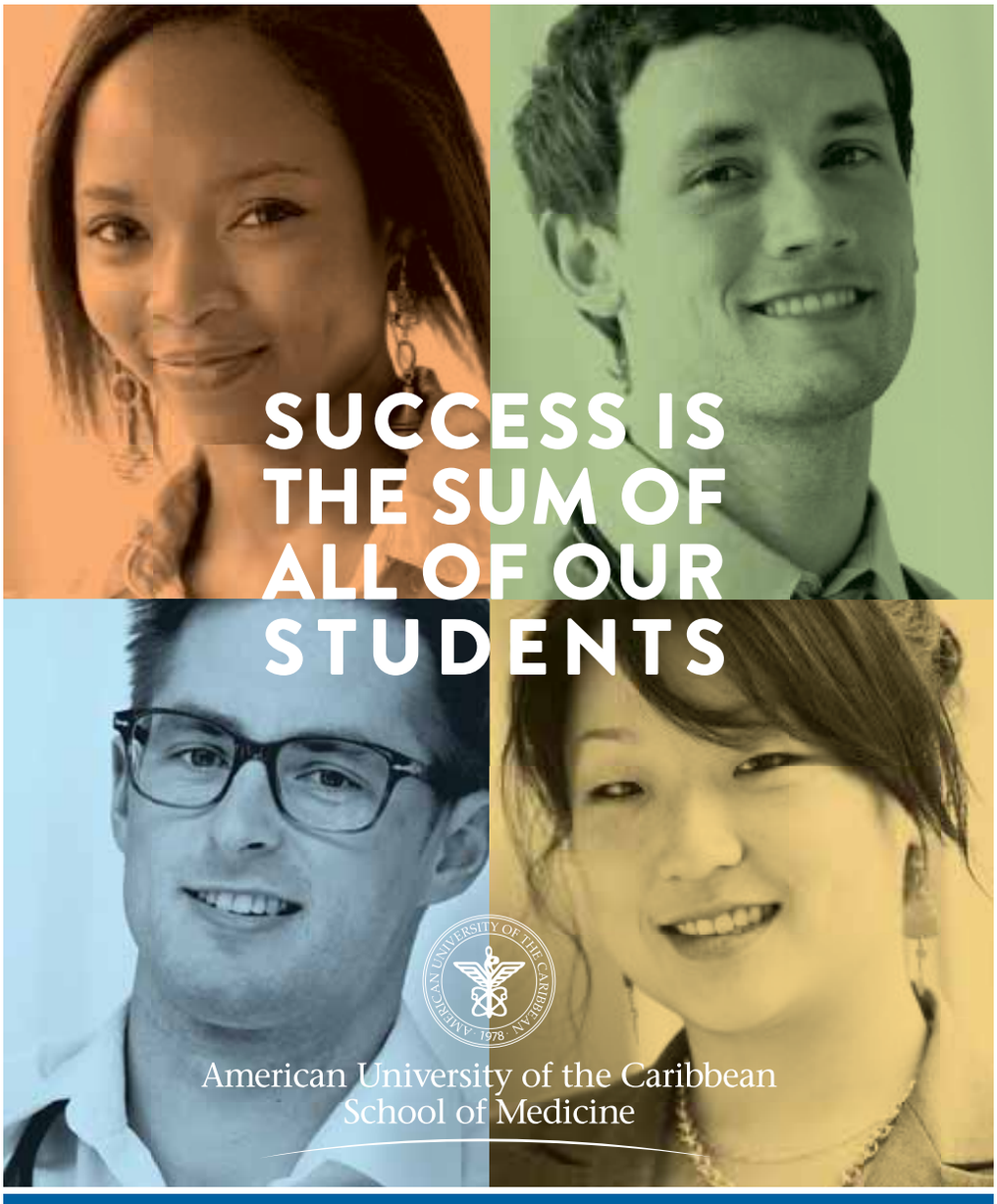
The suspect is between 6 feet tall and 6-foot-2, at 175 pounds.

Police said that he was last seen wearing a black jacket, black-and-white baseball hat with the letter "A" on it (similar to the Atlanta Braves logo), black pants, a white T-shirt and white sneakers.

Anyone with information is asked to call Crime Stoppers at 800-577-TIPS (8477).

The public can also submit their tips by logging on to the Crime Stoppers website.

ANNA SANDERS



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A Christmas tree is recycled at last weekend's MulchFest. / DANNY AVILA, NYC PARKS

New Yorkers break record for recycling at MulchFest

Greening. Wood chippers were working overtime at parks across the city last weekend.

More than 30,000 Christmas trees were recycled during the city's MulchFest on Saturday and Sunday, the Parks Department said.

The number toppled the previous record of 26,000 trees mulched last year.

The 18th annual event gave New Yorkers an opportunity to mulch their trees into wood chips that will be used in city parks and gardens.

Residents were also able to take home a bag of chips to use in their gardens or to place in tree beds.

"Mulch helps our city's trees and plants by deterring weeds, retaining moisture and adding nutrients to the soil," according to a statement by Liam Kavanagh, first deputy commissioner for the parks department.

Birdie, GreeNYC's mascot, is the face of MulchFest. GreeNYC partnered with the Parks Department and the Department of Sanitation for the event.

"Everything that we can do to reduce, reuse and recycle our precious resources is a step in the right direction for a cleaner and greener New York City," Sanitation Commissioner John Doherty said.

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Lots of mulch

The previous record for most Christmas trees recycled at MulchFest was 26,000 in 2013.

- The old trees are converted into wood chips.
- The mulch is then used to nourish trees, plants and gardens throughout the city.
- MulchFest drop-off points were located at parks throughout the five boroughs.

Poll. NJ voters believe Christie in dark on GW Bridge scandal

The Quinnipiac poll had a margin of error of plus or minus 2.8 percentage points. / GETTY IMAGES

New Jersey voters do not blame Gov. Chris Christie for an epic September traffic jam on one of the world's busiest bridges, but think the scandal will hurt his chances as a 2016 presidential contender, a poll released on Wednesday found.

The prominent U.S. Republican's repeated apologies for the four-day tie-up has softened his image with voters who recently reelected him to a second term, earning him one of the lowest "bully" scores recorded in a poll by Quinnipiac University.

Fully 50 percent of respondents polled believed Christie's statement he did not know that a top aide, who he has since fired, called for the closure of three lanes on the George Washington Bridge possibly as political payback to the Democratic mayor of Fort Lee.

Just 41 percent of the 1,207 voters polled Jan. 10-13, after the release of emails tying the aide to the scandal dubbed "Bridgegate" by local media, did not believe Christie's assertions that he did not know his staff had been involved.

REUTERS

No impact

38%

The poll found 49 percent of those polled said the scandal could damage the rising star in the Republican Party in his expected 2016 run for the White House, with 38 percent saying the scandal will have no impact.

Voters

54%

Some 54 percent of voters regarded the former federal prosecutor as more of a leader than a bully, with 40 percent labeling him a bully. Quinnipiac first asked that question in 2010.

North Carolina trip

President unveils manufacturing research hub

President Barack Obama on Wednesday announced a new public-private manufacturing hub in North Carolina during his visit to North Carolina State University in Raleigh, seeking to bolster an industry that he considers essential to raising middle class incomes.

The hub, backed by $70 million in federal funding, would connect manufacturers with emerging research on energy-efficient, high-power electronic chips to make electronic devices smaller and faster, he said. REUTERS

President Obama arrives at North Carolina State University. / GETTY IMAGES

Released by TMZ

Marine Corps investigates photos of bodies being burned

The Marine Corps said on Wednesday it was investigating a series of photos depicting what appeared to be a Marine pouring flammable liquid on dead bodies in an unidentified compound and setting them ablaze.

The photos were sent to the Defense Department last week by the entertainment website TMZ, which said it had been told the pictures were taken in Fallujah, Iraq, in 2004 and the bodies were those of slain insurgents, a U.S. defense official said.

REUTERS

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Capital cannabis

Washington, D.C., panel weighs decriminalizing marijuana

The District of Columbia will take a step closer toward decriminalizing marijuana on Wednesday with a move that will make smoking a joint in the U.S. capital a violation comparable to a parking ticket.

With Washington arresting people for pot possession at a higher rate than any state, a city council panel is set to mark up a bill that would reduce penalties for possessing less than an ounce (28 grams) of marijuana to a fine as little as $25.

Decriminalization would hold down police and legal costs and reduce "undeniable racial disparities" that see blacks far more likely than whites to be arrested for pot, said Tommy Wells, chairman of the Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety, which will make changes to the bill.

"We have to take action to decriminalize possession of an ounce or less of marijuana and reform our criminal justice system," Wells said in a statement. REUTERS

By the numbers

15

If the bill is passed, Washington would join 15 states and a handful of cities that have decriminalized marijuana use, making possession a civil rather than a criminal offense.

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Apple reaches consent decree over children's app purchases

Result. The Commission vote to accept the consent agreement package was 3-1.

Apple app / GETTY IMAGES

Apple Inc. will refund consumers at least $32.5 million to settle a long-standing complaint that the technology company billed U.S. consumers for charges incurred by children buying mobile apps without their parents' consent.

Under the terms of the settlement, announced on Wednesday by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission, Apple also will be required to change its billing practices to ensure it obtains consent from consumers before charging for items sold in mobile apps.

"Whether you're doing business in the mobile arena or the mall down the street, fundamental consumer protections apply," said FTC Chairwoman Edith Ramirez. "You cannot charge consumers for purchases they did not authorize."

In an internal memo to employees, Apple CEO Tim Cook said the company decided to settle rather than risk a long and distracting legal battle, because the FTC's proposals aligned with the company's own intended changes.

Ramirez said the commission had logged "tens of thousands of complaints" from consumers over the unauthorized purchases of apps such as Dragon Story and Tiny Zoo Friends.

The FTC complaint alleges that Apple does not inform account holders that entering their password in the company's App Store opens a 15-minute window in which children can incur unlimited charges with no further action from the account holder. REUTERS

Quoted

"Protecting children has been a top priority for the App Store from the very beginning."
Steve Dowling
Apple spokesman

GETTY IMAGES

AG vows probe after spill

West Virginia's top law enforcement officer on Wednesday vowed a full investigation of a chemical spill that contaminated tap water for hundreds of thousands of people. Attorney General Patrick Morrisey said there was a lot of speculation surrounding the spill into the Elk River at Charleston, the state capital, on Thursday that shut off water to more than 300,000 people. REUTERS

See more at www.metro.us

Pro-choice demonstrators stand outside the U.S. Supreme Court following oral arguments in the case of McCullen v. Coakley, dealing with a Massachusetts law imposing a 35-foot buffer zone around abortion clinics for demonstrations and protests, in Washington, D.C. / GETTY IMAGES

US Supreme Court skeptical on abortion clinic buffer-zone law

Protesters. The law looks at freedom of speech rights under the First Amendment.

U.S. Supreme Court justices raised questions on Wednesday about the scope of a Massachusetts law ensuring access for patients at abortion clinics, making it likely they will strike it down as unconstitutional as anti-abortion protesters have demanded.

They have challenged the law, saying it violated their freedom of speech rights under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution by preventing them from standing on the sidewalk and speaking to those entering clinics.

One of the main concerns raised by justices was the 2007 law does nothing to distinguish between protesters seeking to disrupt a clinic's work and people who say they wish to quietly counsel women and try to persuade them not to have abortions.

It is not clear if the court would have the votes to go further than striking down the Massachusetts law and possibly overturn a 2000 Supreme Court precedent that upheld a similar buffer-zone law in Colorado.

Of the current nine justices, five were on the bench when that case, Hill v. Colorado, was decided.

The Massachusetts law was enacted in part because of safety concerns highlighted by violent acts committed against abortion providers in the past. In 1994, two abortion clinic workers were killed outside a clinic in Brookline, Mass. REUTERS

No-entry zone

35

A majority of the justices at times expressed concerns during a one-hour argument before the high court that the blanket 35-feet no-entry zone around clinics is overly broad.

Porch shooting

Michigan man set for murder trial in racially charged case

A white suburban Detroit homeowner will face trial in June on a second-degree murder charge that he shot to death an unarmed young black woman who knocked on his door seeking help early one November morning, a judge ruled on Wednesday.

Theodore Wafer, 54, stood silent as his attorneys entered a not guilty plea during a brief hearing before Wayne County Judge Qiana Denise Lillard. The trial is set for June 2.

Wafer is accused of killing Renisha McBride, 19, on his front porch with a shotgun blast to the face in the racially charged case that sparked protests in Dearborn Heights, Mich., and comparisons to the Trayvon Martin shooting.

A judge in Dearborn Heights in December ordered Wafer bound over to state circuit court, which in Michigan hears all criminal cases that could result in prison sentences. He was arraigned Wednesday on charges of second-degree murder, manslaughter and a felony firearms count. REUTERS

Police. Texas woman strangled newborn son, tossed him in garbage

A Texas woman arrested on suspicion of killing her newborn son and dumping him in the trash told detectives she "strangled the baby and watched him die," according to an arrest affidavit released by San Antonio police on Wednesday.

The body of the infant, likely less than a week old, was found stuffed in a duffel bag on the intake conveyor belt of a Waste Management recycling center in San Antonio two days before Christmas.

Nidia Alvarado
BEXAR COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Nidia Alvarado, 25, was taken into custody on Tuesday night and charged with capital murder, which carries the possibility of the death penalty. REUTERS

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Embassy attack

Senate panel: Attack in Benghazi was preventable

The Senate Intelligence Committee said on Wednesday that the deadly Sept. 11, 2012, attack by militants on U.S. government posts in Benghazi, Libya, was preventable, and faulted the State Department for inadequate security precautions.

In the months before the attacks on an American diplomatic post and CIA compound in Libya's second-largest city, U.S. intelligence agencies had issued numerous reports warning that security in eastern Libya was deteriorating and that U.S. personnel and posts in Benghazi were at risk, according to a declassified report issued by the panel.

But the committee said the State Department "failed to increase security enough to address the threat," even though the diplomatic outpost in Benghazi had suffered two earlier, but less damaging, attacks during the previous six months. **REUTERS**

By the numbers

4

Four Americans were killed when militants attacked the lightly protected U.S. diplomatic compound and a better-fortified CIA base nearby.

See more at www.metro.us

Math app Dragonbox aims to turn solving equations into games. / GETTY IMAGES

Norwegian students blow away American math-solving record

There's an app for math. Students solved nearly 5 million algebra equations in the challenge.

Norwegian students solved nearly 5 million algebra equations in a weeklong challenge using an app aimed at popularizing mathematics among children, whose math skills have been steadily sliding in international rankings.

Students hoped to just beat the previous record of 40,000 equations set by students in Washington state using the Dragonbox app; but that record fell in just three hours, organizers said.

"This has been a mind-blowing experience for us," Dragonbox co-founder Jean Baptiste Huynh said as the competition came to an end. "No one has done anything of this scale on a national level before.

"The best part is that this is scalable. We hope to do a national event also in the U.S. and in Brazil within a year. And then we might go global with these events," he added.

Dragonbox aims to redefine mathematical language for games and adapt the learning process into game play for children in both elementary and high school. **REUTERS**

By the numbers

30

Norwegian students were ranked 30th.

36

U.S. students fell to 36th from 31st.

250K

The Dragonbox app has been downloaded more than 250,000 times.

250K

Students in Minnesota will be next, hoping to solve 250,000 equations.

Australia. Scientists microchip bees to understand diseases

Australian scientists are gluing tiny sensors onto thousands of honeybees to track their movements in a trial aimed at halting the spread of diseases that have wiped out populations in the northern hemisphere.

Scientists at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO), Australia's national science agency, said the microchips could help tackle so-called colony collapse disorder, a situation where bees mysteriously disappear from hives, and the encroachment of the parasitic varroa mite.

Scientists will use tweezers to glue on the sensors, weighing about 5 milligrams, after soothing the bees to sleep. Scientists will examine the effectiveness of pesticides in protecting the bees from colony collapse disorder and varroa mite. **REUTERS**

It's science, honey. / GETTY IMAGES

Quoted

"Honeybees play a vital role in the landscape through a free pollination service for agriculture, which various crops rely on to increase yields."

Paulo de Souza, who is leading the project with CSIRO

A swimmingly good party for Steven Tyler

Steven Tyler, looking more and more like an extra from "Deadwood," held onto model Marisa Miller at the 50th anniversary of the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue at Dolby Theatre on Tuesday in Hollywood, Calif.

ALL PHOTOS GETTY IMAGES

Talking point

Lohan needs security detail

Lindsay Lohan likes to use protection, apparently. While in London this week, the scandal-prone starlet reportedly put in a call to the Metropolitan Police to provide an escort for a 10-foot walk from her car to a venue for a friend's birthday party, according to the Mail Online. Lohan apparently felt she needed the beefed up security detail because of a clutch of paparazzi waiting for her, and she reportedly asked the police that to arrest the photographers for loitering.

Ciara announces pregnancy with Future

R&B star Ciara and her fiance, producer Future, are having a baby! So is there a boy or a girl in Ciara and Future's future?

Ciara knows, but she's not telling. However, one thing she will say is that it will be the kind of baby that Future likes and Ciara does not.

Regarding the sex of their child, the "Body Party" singer told HuffPost Live, "I did have a preference before I found out what it was. … [The result] was different than what I thought, but my fiance got what he wanted."

Cool, so awesome lesson for new parents: You should both establish preferences for the sex of your baby, and they should be different so no matter what, one of you is disappointed in your child before it's even born.

Ciara spilled the news on Tuesday's episode of "The View" that she and Future are expecting. Barbara Walters — who, during the first few minutes of an interview, kept looking at the singer's torso — addressed Ciara in typical Barbara Walters fashion, saying, "There are rumors about pregnancy. Do you want to confirm?"

And as Barbara Walters is wont to do, she got results: Ciara stood up to display her baby bump.

Ciara outside of "The View" on Tuesday

Gender bias

"I did have a preference before I found out what it was. ... [The result] was different than what I thought, but my fiance got what he wanted." Ciara

Ciara and Future plan to marry this year. Presumably after the birth of their child — Miss C looks pretty far along. They should probably wait until she's had time to recover from her baby's birth and stupid gender. **MELINDA TAUB**

2 CULTURE

THE WORD

Dorothy Robinson takes on the world of gossip.

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Cinema. We pick the movies to follow after they premiere at the freezing Sundance Film Festival.

Back when it was called the Utah/US Film Festival, the Sundance Film Festival had a simple mission: to draw attention to genuine independent filmmaking. Nowadays it's just another high-profile attention-suck, where hotly anticipated "independent" (read: usually not) projects sit with tiny films you'll never hear about again. But there's always the occasional shock, as with last year's "Fruitvale Station." Here's a handful of this year's titles you (possibly) already know you want to see after they leave the coldest film festival in the country.

Lena Dunham and Anna Kendrick hang out in Joe Swanberg's "Happy Christmas." / BEN RICHARDSON

Looking good

'Happy Christmas'

Once the king of experimental micro-indies like "Hannah Takes the Stairs," Joe Swanberg has shifted to more traditional indies with "real" actors and cameras on tripods. Here he reunites with "Drinking Buddies" star Anna Kendrick and adds Melanie Lynskey, Lena Dunham and a real cinematographer.

'Boyhood'

Richard Linklater's epic "Before Sunrise/Sunset/Midnight" series is impressive and all, but what's truly jaw-dropping is another long-term project featuring Ethan Hawke: this look at the youth and adolescence of a kid (Ellar Salmon), which the filmmaker has been shooting once a year for 12 years. (Hawke plays his dad.) And Sundance gets it first.

'Finding Fela'

The prolific Alex Gibney (late of "The Armstrong Lie") tackles Afrobeat legend Fela Kuti for his latest documentary. And if it's a bust, there's always the in-the-works Fela biopic by "Mother of George" filmmaker Andrew Dosunmu.

'Frank'

Michael Fassbender doesn't get many chances to be funny, or wear goofy cardboard heads. He does both in this comedy/biopic, which tells the true story of Chris Sievey, a comedian who fronts a band under his fake-headed alter ego.

'Laggies'

Ever since "Humpday," writer-director Lynn Shelton has been unstoppable, cranking out intimate, character- and actor-driven films with high concepts. Her latest stars no less than Keira Knightley as a woman who lies to her fiance about a getaway, when she really wants to hang with her friends.

'The Trip to Italy'

Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon reunite after the dining-and-impersonations romp "The Trip" to hit even more picturesque digs, all while one-upping each other via improv.

'White Bird in a Blizzard'

New Queer Cinema legend Gregg Araki returns to the arch drama stylings of "Mysterious Skin" with Shailene Woodley as a teen whose mother (Eva Green) goes missing.

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ADMIT ONE

Metro rounds up what's in cinemas this week.

Must see

'Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit'

1 One of the Cold War's most reliable do-gooders returns with this reboot, in which the CIA man (Chris Pine) battles Russians. Wait: Russians? What era is this?

Chris Pine takes over the role played by several other big-name actors in "Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit." / PARAMOUNT PICTURES

2 **'Ride Along'** Surely the Ice Cube circa "Straight Outta Compton" always imagined he'd be doing little else but playing cops. Here, the ex-N.W.A. member decides to torture the diminutive, motormouth wannabe-officer (Kevin Hart) who wants to marry his sister.

3 **'The Nut Job'** Will Arnett headlines this heist 'toon, voicing a loner squirrel who learns the value of sharing and socialist living when the fellow animals of an urban park find themselves short on food for the winter.

4 **'Devil's Due'** A horror film cropping up in the infamous January dumping grounds? Where do we sign up? For whatever it's worth, this finds a couple dealing with an apparent demonic pregnancy and its directors cut their teeth on the low-budget "V/H/S."

5 **'Generation War'** This epic look at five German friends who embark on five diverse paths during WWII was originally screened in its homeland as a three-part miniseries, but it plays here as a two-part epic that devours four and a half hours.

6 **'Like Father, Like Son'** Sorry, everyone: This isn't the Kirk Cameron-Dudley Moore '80s comedy but a thoughtful and moving drama from Japan, in which two families deal with the revelation that their respective sons were switched at birth.

7 **'Maidentrip'** A few years ago, 15-year-old Laura Dekker became the youngest person to sail around the world. Luckily she had a camera with her.

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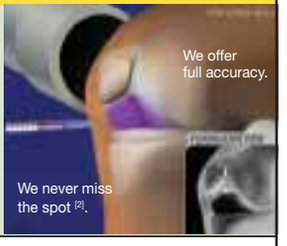

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‘Looking’ at the gay experience through a new lens

TV. Frankie J. Alvarez discusses his role in HBO’s hyped new show.

Before he was tapped to audition for HBO’s “Looking” (a new show about the lives of three young gay men in San Francisco) Frankie J. Alvarez had never acted in front of a camera. A recent Juilliard grad, he’d been working the regional theater scene. But when HBO calls, you answer. Now, he’s one of the three leads on a hotly anticipated new show and says he could not be happier. We got him on the line from New York to talk diversity in media, filming sex scenes and more.

What was it about the show that attracted you to join the project?
First of all, the show, writing-wise, is just so naturalistic and the way that Andrew [Haigh] films it ... the camera just feels like another person that you’re in the room with. You really feel a sense of intimacy and it feels like real people talking, which is really exciting. Then, of course, playing Augustine has been a really exciting challenge. What’s so great is to be playing an intelligent, articulate Latin man who really embraces his sexuality and has a strong sense of who he is. As a first generation American with a Cuban background,

Q&A

‘A little scene that happens’

Does the show attempt to confront any stereotypes?
I think what’s really great is that it feels like, for these three guys, the gay aspect of their lives is just one circumstance out of the many circumstances that they are dealing with. That being said, there are some jokes. There is a little scene that happens in episode six where I tease Patrick for having a gay-sounding voice. So little things like that happen.

Ryan Brown, *Conductor and Artistic Director*
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"Looking" (with Alvarez, far right) premieres on Jan. 19 at 10:30 p.m. on HBO. / JOHN P. JOHNSON

it's really fun. I'm not sure we have ever seen a Latin man like this on television.

There hasn't been an exclusively gay show on a big network like this since "The L Word." What do you hope this will add to the conversation?
I think what we really want is for the gay community to feel represented and that their voice is being heard, and that they feel they can see themselves in this show. And then, for the straight community, to feel like they have a window into what these guys' lives are like: To realize and see their own life circumstances within these guys. My wife and I have watched the show and there have been certain moments where we have been like, "Oh my God, that reminds me of that time where I dated that girl and that relationship I had with that guy."

I hope that we'll soon get to a point where a scene with two guys making out isn't shocking, it's just another romantic scene.
I hope for the same as well, that we don't have this divide where this is a gay film and this is a film for straight people. Hopefully that changes in the same way it should change for minorities as well. We shouldn't be making movies specifically for a specific group.

HBO is known for its graphic sex scenes. I imagine sex scenes are uncomfortable, period. Was shooting your first gay sex scene hard?
This was obviously my first big on-camera thing, so I really don't know what the difference would be like. For me, what's really good about the sex scenes in this show is that it's not sex for sex's sake. A lot of these sex scenes are advancing the characters forward, so for us as actors it's really easy to throw yourself into the circumstances of what's going on with the character emotionally.

ALEXANDRA CAVALLO
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Bonus question

'Guys'?

The show seems a bit like "Girls," with gay men in San Francisco instead of straight girls in New York. Is there any truth to that?
Yeah, I think that's a simple way to look at it — and I think it's flattering to be compared to a show like "Girls" or "Sex and the City," which are marked hits of huge quality for HBO — but I think the comparison stops once you watch the show. Yes, they are friends surviving in the city and dealing with relationships, love and their careers, but just totally writing-wise, and the way the show feels, it really isn't like those shows. You know how it is? You have got to sort of frame it, you have to frame the new with the old. Hopefully in 10 years there will be shows coming out where people will be like, "Oh, it's like the straight 'Looking.'"

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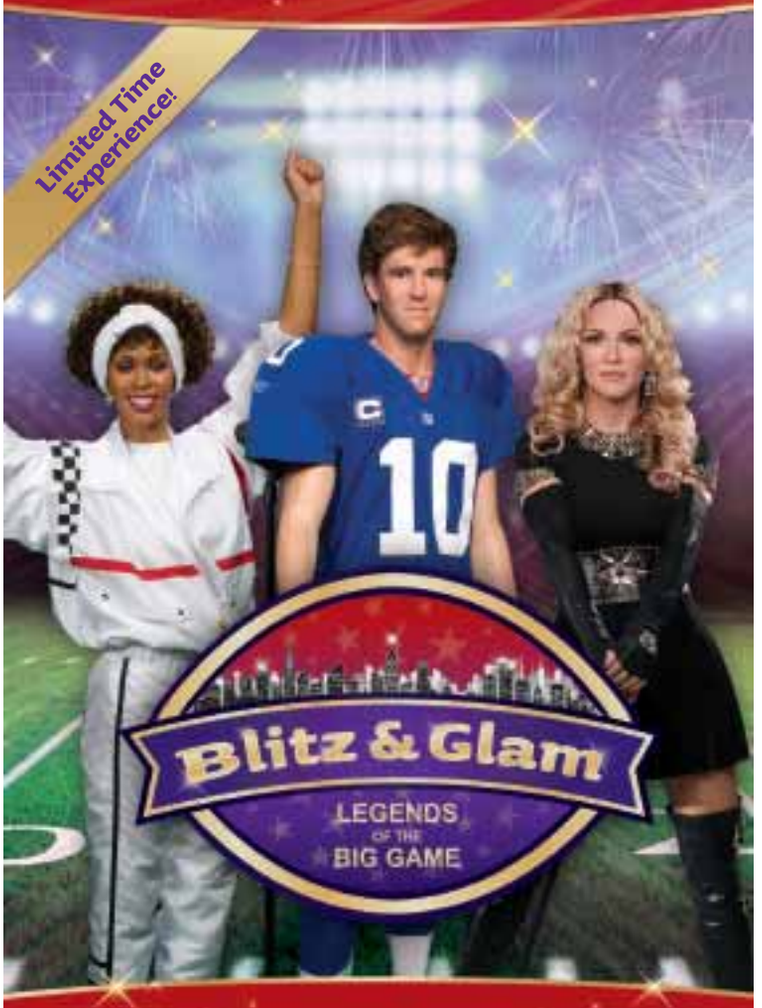

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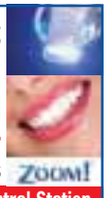

PLUS
Advice
Tidy means thoughtful
"Soften your space," Shapot advises. This means buying fresh flowers, lighting candles or getting a throw for your couch. Spruce up your space the same way you'll put some love into your outfit. It shows that you care, Shapot adds: "It's a nice feeling to know somebody thought about it ahead of time."

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Make your space as sexy as you are

NEW in the new year

Hot mess. When you take somebody home, be sure your space keeps up appearances.

Having trouble finding love? A clutter-free makeover could be a good start. / PHOTODISC

The date is going well and you're ready to bring that guy or gal back to your apartment, but the sirens go off in your head as you scramble to surreptitiously straighten up as the date pours a glass of wine. That's because you still haven't removed that picture of your ex from the shelf and there are unmentionables sitting on the bathroom floor.

Since your home is a reflection of who you are, professional organizing consultant Donna David says it's a big first impression: "Your home tells a potential mate so much about your style and taste, personality and lifestyle."

Having a welcoming, organized home isn't only wise — it's a mirror of yourself as a potential mate. If your date sees a ton of clutter, it could be game over. Lisa Shapot, co-founder of home design firm The Think Tank, says checking out your date's digs is a test to see if you can potentially cohabit with someone. If a neat freak walks into total chaos, she says, "You'll have a 50/50 chance they'll walk away regardless of how fabulous you are."

Then there's the possibility of revealing too much, too soon — like mistakenly leaving some old medication laying around after a nasty infection has disappeared. Sindi Landman, Shapot's business partner and co-founder, emphasizes the privacy factor: "You don't want to open too much of yourself too quickly."

Over time, as a potential relationship blossoms, they can get to know your living space better too. "After three or four dates, if someone sees you left a dish in the sink, that's no big deal," Landman quips.

They recommend the basics in the beginning, like sweeping, going through medicine cabinets and filing old bills. Also, remove any mementos of exes. Shapot says that when you're holding on too tightly to an old relationship, your "heart is blocked to the potential for something new."

As you remove the clutter, The Think Tank's co-founders recommend a "daykover." This involves a makeover of your abode without lofty renovations or time commitments — instead, it's a mini overhaul to move things around and spice it up a bit.

VICKI SALEMI
letters@metro.us

Tips for date-friendly homes

DOs:

- Get rid of unnecessary items. Place excess photos and knickknacks in a box. "Less is more," says David.
- Hide personal items like self-help books. This includes books on the perfect marriage and relationship rescue books too.
- Keep an eye on visible toiletries. Keep all personal items hidden. David advises, "Don't display an extra toothbrush even though it could be for a valid reason."
- Toss storage items after a year. After you put something in a box to store it, Landman says, if you haven't "looked at it or thought about it," you should toss it.

DON'Ts:

- Maintain a gross refrigerator. Seriously: Toss that old, moldy food, especially since it's not uncommon to open a refrigerator during a date to grab a beverage.
- Let paperwork circulate. David advises reading daily mail rapidly. "Either toss, shred, take action (pay bills) or file away important documents."
- Allow clutter. By straightening up daily, you'll prevent clutter from accumulating.
- Have an unmade bed. Simple enough: Be sure to make it every day, advises Landman.

Where you'll want to dine out in 2014

Patatas bravas are on the menu at Boqueria UES.
BOQUERIA

NEW in the new year

Eats. Start making those reservations now — these places are sure to be packed.

Jean-Georges Vongerichten
GETTY IMAGES

Treehaus

460 W. 42nd St., no phone number yet
Like Gotham West Market and Smorgasburg before it, this foodie haven will open a second location this spring. The buffet-style spot will serve French-tinged American food and will be open 24 hours.

Huertas

107 First Ave., no phone number yet
We got a sneak peek at Jonah Miller's new Northern Spanish eatery at his pop-up over the summer, and we're stoked for the March opening of his permanent digs. The four-course prix dinner (think oil-poached cod and charred blood orange with olive oil ice cream) is calling our name.

Meatless meals

ABC Home Grown

888 Broadway, 212-473-3000
Jean-Georges Vongerichten has already earned plenty of buzz in the NYC food scene for ABC Kitchen and its Mexican spinoff, ABC Cocina. In the spring, he's set to open ABC Home Grown, which will offer vegetarian and vegan fare inside the former Le Pain Quotidien space inside ABC Carpet & Home. It's a labor of love for the chef, who refrains from meat once a week. Also to come: an "indoor Union Square green market" in the home store's basement, he told the New York Post.

Bodega Negra

355 W. 16th St., 212-229-2336
The Dream Downtown will open this Mexican kitchen in February. A partnership between the TAO Group and Serge Becker (who's behind Miss Lily's and La Esquina), the London import boasts the hotel's executive chef, Michael Armstrong.

The Smith NoMad

1150 Broadway, no phone number yet
The Flatiron district has become a buzzy food nabe, boasting high-end eats from Eataly and ilili to the more wallet-friendly (but still crave-worthy) original Shake Shack. The latest addition to the 'hood is the fourth location of the comfort food house, which will serve breakfast, lunch, dinner and brunch when it opens in the fall.

1 Knickerbocker

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Chef Stephen Hubbell modernized century-old recipes for local fish and wild game (elk, venison, etc.), and pickles his foods onsite at this recently opened Bushwick eatery.

Spain in New York

Boqueria UES

1460 Second Ave., no phone number yet
The third location of the seasonal Spanish restaurant will open this spring. Expect jamon iberico and a dedicated churros station, in addition to other tapas, by Barcelona native Marc Vidal. The open kitchen at the 80-seat space means you can watch as he and his chefs prepare your meal.

MEREDITH ENGEL
meredith.engel@metro.us

Root & Bone

200 E. Third St., no phone number yet
"Top Chef" alums Janine Booth and Jeffrey McInnis are in charge of this new Alphabet City Southern-comforts joint opening in March. Sure, there's some drama behind the scenes (Google their names), but since they honed their skills on the Bravo juggernaut, we trust that these dishes are all made with an ingredient called love.

Trends you'll see at restaurants this year

Izabela Wojcik, The James Beard Foundation's director of house programming, fills us in:

IZABELA WOJCIK
PROVIDED

- The proliferation of hybrid cuisines in restaurants – particularly Asian mash-ups. Jewish-Japanese is an especially unique fusion that is visibly on the rise.
- Sustainable seafood will be an important topic in 2014, and we can expect to see more of lesser-known fish on menus as well as increased use of the whole fish, especially parts that used to be discarded: fish cheeks, fish livers and fish collars.
- Bars specializing in a specific liqueur, particularly obscure or historic spirits such as absinthe or vermouth.
- Vegetables will be "hot," replacing meat as the most interesting and prominent item on the plate. Animal proteins will take a backseat as garnishes.
- Lesser-known ethnic cuisines will be celebrated: Nicaraguan, Colombian, Peruvian and Filipino.
- Gluten-free will be the buzzword. It will proliferate from manufactured products to restaurant menus.
- Ancient grains such as quinoa, amaranth and freekeh will appear more regularly on menus and in interesting multi-cultural preparations.
- Chefs getting more involved locally, with their restaurants being perceived as the heart of the community instead of just a place to eat. Chefs will be seen as advocates and will use their power and consumer attention to address serious food system issues.
- Restaurants opening in nontraditional spaces, such as stores, art galleries and museums.

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One more

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Ninth Ward reminds us of a classy dad's den.
PROVIDED

Cozy on up

Ward off winter. Take a seat by the fire at these establishments.

If winter is good for anything, it's cozying up by the fireplace. Don't have one? Neither do we, so we bundled up and headed out to find some snug spots to warm our toes.

Several Manhattan hotels have a welcoming fire aglow in the lobby, but the Refinery Hotel takes the opposite approach, with a brick fireplace as the winter centerpiece of its rooftop bar. Its inviting design includes terra-cotta flooring, Persian rugs and wood paneling (constructed from the original building's water tank), capped by views of the Empire State Building. Refinery executive chef Jeffrey Forrest completes the picture with a warming toddy.

"My favorite to enjoy by the fire is the Chef's Cider, which pairs perfectly with our sweet potato fries," Forrest says. "The sweet and savory flavors from the fries' brown sugar and Aleppo pepper are a perfect match for the Sailor Jerry Spiced Rum and lemon in the cider."

Bar 21 boasts a real wood burner.
PROVIDED

Indeed, it's amazing what a mug of hot cider and a fireplace can do for the spirit. Nic Ratner, co-owner of Ninth Ward, insists on having both fired up for passers-by. The sandwich board outside reads "fireplace," and it's an instant draw for people looking to warm up. East Village regulars are hearth-huggers, too. Ratner's mulled cider is "just perfect for sipping by the fire," he tells us, and besides rib-sticking gumbo or chili-spiced mac 'n' cheese, Ratner says the gravy-soaked poutine is a popular fireside nibble. "It's good for sharing."

And set on the 21 Club's ground floor, Bar 21's real wood-burning fireplace is a rarity among its largely gas-fired brethren.

If you go

Refinery Hotel
63 W. 38th St., 646-664-0310

The Ninth Ward
180 Second Ave., 212-979-9273

Bar 21
21 W. 52nd St., 212-582-7200

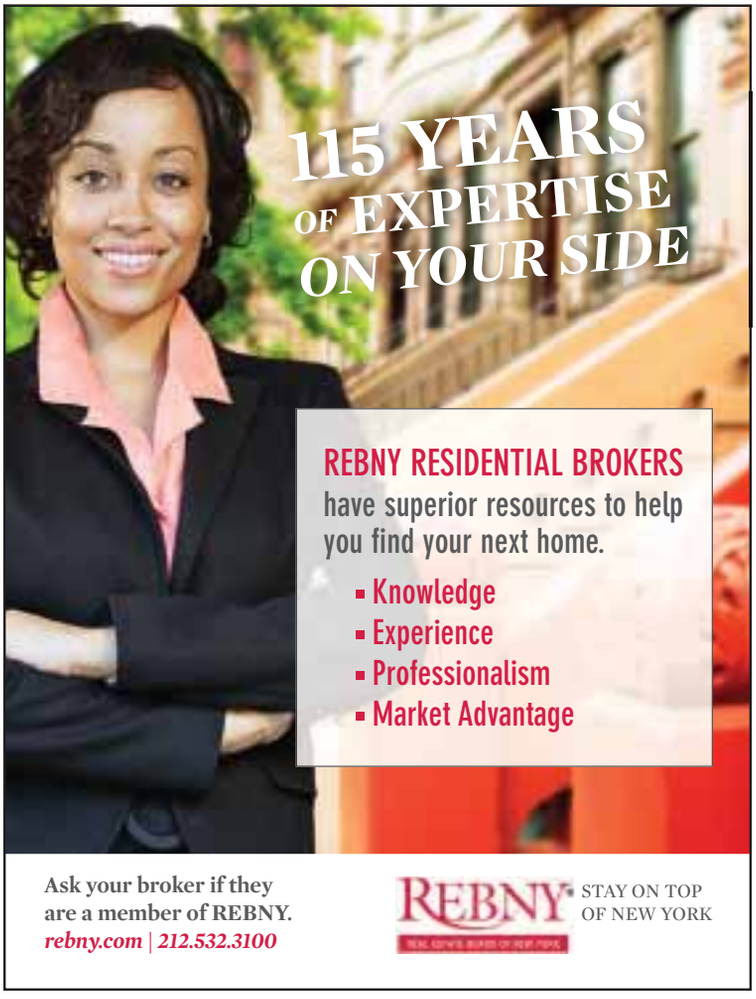
Lantern's Keep
49 W. 44th St., 212-453-4287

LINDA CLARKE
letters@metro.us

'Perfect substitute'

Forget dessert

Sipping a Brandy Alexander by the fire at Lantern's Keep is a sweet seasonal treat. The drink originated at Rector's in New York City as a gin cocktail, created by bartender Troy Alexander. "Later, brandy was substituted for the gin," says Lantern's Keep head bartender Rene Hidalgo. "The brandy-based version, or Alexander #2, is a rich yet balanced cocktail, and a perfect substitute for dessert."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Upload your own events!

Have an upcoming event that you want to let Metro readers know about? Send an email to events@metro.us and we'll get it on our new listings website.

Sponsored listings are shaded.

COMEDY

Are you ready to belt out Whitney Houston songs? / GETTY IMAGES

Whitney Houston Jukebox Musical: A Hastily Written Masterpiece Starring the Audience

Jan. 20, 8 p.m.; Cameo Gallery, 93 N. Sixth St., Williamsburg; $10, 718-302-1180; www.cameony.net
Is "The Bodyguard" your favorite movie? Do you wanna dance with somebody? We don't even want to know your drug of choice, but if you're a Whitney Houston maniac then here you go: a performance with a plot tied together by her songs, sung by YOU! Audience members can choose to have singing or non-singing roles, or just watch the show.

RECREATION

Escape winter's grip with a trip to the tropics

Saturday-Feb.23, 10 a.m.; The New York Botanical Garden, 2900 Southern Blvd., The Bronx; $20, 718-817-8700; www.nybg.org
Imagine yourself in a tropical paradise where snow and frostbite are nothing but funny little cartoons you see in children's books about Christmas. At the NYBG, indulge yourself in the Enid A. Haupt Conservatory's permanent collection with amazing photos of palms, tropical fruit, flowering vines, birds of paradise and heliconia. Someone pass us an ice-cold lemonade, please!

The Healer's Hut at New York Botanical Garden is right in our backyard. / IVO M. VERMEULEN

BOOKS

A Conversation with Paul Auster and Isaac Gewirtz

Thursday, 7 p.m.
The Morgan Library & Museum
225 Madison Ave.,
$25, 212-685-0008
www.themorgan.org
Paul Auster, the best-selling author of 16 novels, purchased his first book at the age of nine — a Modern Library edition of Edgar Allan Poe's poems and stories. Chatting with Isaac Gewirtz, co-curator of the Morgan Library exhibition "Edgar Allan Poe: Terror of the Soul," Auster will share his experiences reading and re-reading Poe's works throughout his life, and the influence it has had on his own writing.

COMEDY

'The Macaulay Culkin Show'

Jan. 19, 7 p.m.
Shea Stadium, 20 Meadow St., Bushwick, $5
www.liveatsheastadium.com
How "The Macaulay Culkin Show" doesn't star Macaulay Culkin is beyond us, but it does promise a "secret" celebrity guest. And although Culkin's never appeared at "The Macaulay Culkin Show" before, we have a feeling the Pizza Underground-singing, kazoo-playing, cheek-slapping, Joe Pesci-tricking "Home Alone" star just might be the secret guest, but who knows? Comedians who will definitely be performing include Larry Murphy ("Bob's Burgers"), Noel Wells ("Saturday Night Live") and more.

Writing Erotica for Pleasure & Money

Friday, 7:30 p.m.
New York Academy of Sex Education, 1150 Second Ave.
$25, 646-470-5129
www.nyacademyofsex.com
Here's a place for both pleasure- and money-seekers to get their sexy on. Learn the ins and outs of erotica writing from award-winning author and editor Rachel Kramer Bussel. She'll teach you how to tailor your stories to particular magazines or anthologies and other tricks of the trade.

CHARITY

The Friends Seminary Shelter's 24th annual MLK benefit concert

Thursday, 7 p.m.
Friends Seminary Meetinghouse, 222 E. 16th St.
212-979-5034
$20 donations encouraged
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Horoscope

♑ Capricorn | Dec. 22-Jan 20. Listen carefully, but don't allow your emotions to sway you in one direction or another. It would be better to mediate.

♒ Aquarius | Jan. 21-Feb 18. A proposal will bring in extra cash and change the way you live. Don't let a secret affair cause grief.

♓ Pisces | Feb. 19-March 20. You can make your dreams come true with a little time and effort. Join organizations that share your interests. A special person should be treated to a romantic evening.

♈ Aries | March 21-April 20. Your changing or inconsistent attitude will cause disruptions with the people you deal with personally and professionally.

♉ Taurus | April 21-May 21. Make personal changes that will keep you up to date. A pleasurable trip will entice you, but caution while traveling will be essential.

♊ Gemini | May 22-June 20. Set your goals high, and get ready for action. Consultation with experts will enable you to cut corners and reach your destination.

♋ Cancer | June 21-July 22. If you feel uncertain, step back and observe. The more information you gather, the easier it will be to make a tough choice. Refuse to get upset.

♌ Leo | July 23-Aug. 22. An emotional matter will skyrocket if you don't control the situation. Prepare to make last-minute changes.

♍ Virgo | Aug. 23-Sept. 22. Take steps to ensure that things go the way you plan. Don't leave anything to chance, and take steps to correct a situation.

♎ Libra | Sept. 23-Oct. 22. Watch what everyone else is doing and protect your interests. Empty promises can be expected.

♏ Scorpio | Oct. 23-Nov. 21. Let your mind wander and your imagination take over. Take a look at your friendships, lifestyle and home base.

♐ Sagittarius | Nov. 22-Dec. 21. An investment opportunity may look like a sure thing, but look before you leap. You aren't likely to have all the facts required to make an educated choice. BERNICE BEDE OSOL

Sudoku: Easy and hard

1		3			6	7		5
					9		4	6
					7	3	1	
	2		6		4			
	3			9			8	
			2		3		6	
	9	6	7					
4	7		9					
5		1	4			9		7

						6	5	
		5	8					3
4					3		8	7
				8		7	2	6
2		3				8		1
7	6	8		2				
8	3		6					9
9					2	5		
	5	1						

How to play
Fill in the grid so that every row, every column and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1-9. There is no math involved. You solve the puzzle with reasoning and logic.

Letters

Czar Christie

Re: 'So-called "bullies" make history' (Metro, Jan. 15) I got a good laugh from Robert Sieger's letter lamenting poor Chris Christie's "ordeal by the liberal media." Our New Jersey governor, a Tony Soprano wannabe, is finally being revealed for the petty, vindictive tyrant that he has always been. Mr. Sieger posted a list of American "bullies who are now American icons," but he forgot many other historical bullies who are also icons, but not in a good way: Caligula, Nero, Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan, Ivan IV, Robespierre, Stalin and many more. You're right, Mr. Sieger — none of them would have tolerated the teachers union either!
JANET WALSH, VIA EMAIL

Follow the money

Re: 'Congress v. the middle class' (Metro, Jan. 15) To letter writer Herb Stark and other Metro readers, may I offer an answer to Congress's inability to do what is right/good for us, the middle class: Money! Republicans and Democrats are in office today because of the larger campaign contributions the upper class is able to give. Statistics show that the elected officials spend more time raising money to be elected than they do on studying policy to benefit the people, especially monetary policy. As stated in the letter, cutting funding is wrong when the problem lies in Congress's ignorance of the money power. The answer is found in our debt-based, usurious monetary system controlled by the privately owned Federal Reserve, where their policy is to have the middle class never have enough money to pay their debts, giving all of our elected officials a sense of a constant state of scarcity.
DAVID SNIECKUS, VIA EMAIL

letters@metro.us

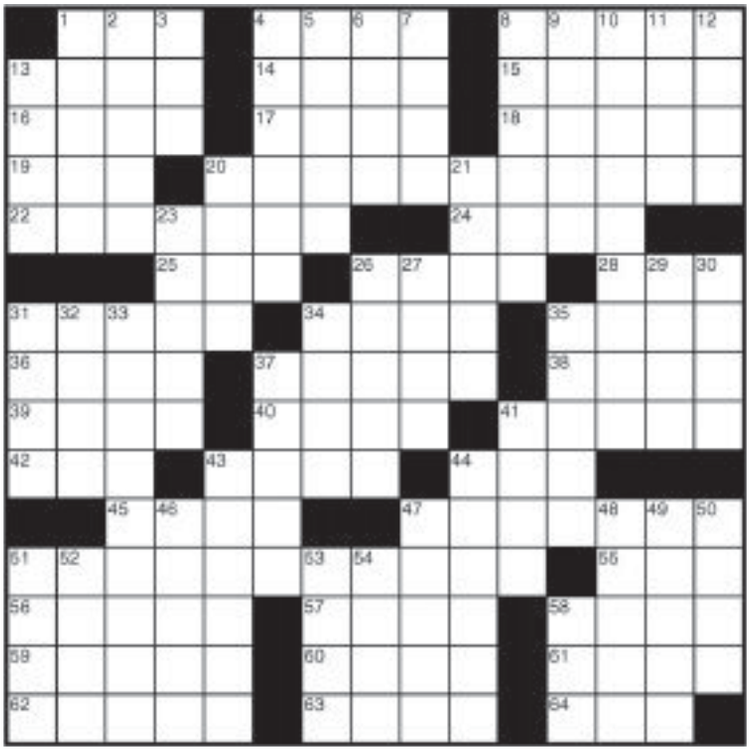
Keep them as brief as possible, preferably under 100 words. Metro reserves the right to edit all letters. Please include your name and contact info.

Crossword

Across
1 Flavor enhancer
4 Cult
8 Hoard (2 wds.)
13 Yawn
14 Lunar phenomenon
15 Port near Kyoto
16 Churn up
17 Paperless exam
18 Chinese pooches, slangily
19 Technique
20 Early mail service (2 wds.)
22 Sputters
24 Balance
25 Belly dance instrument
26 Mutual fund charge
28 Hedge shrub
31 Fixes a sock
34 Throng
35 NASDAQ rival
36 Toward shelter
37 Zeus' shield
38 Metrical foot
39 Grab onto
40 Set down
41 Elbows
42 August kid, maybe
43 Huge excess
44 Place to soak
45 Rocky Mountain st.
47 Cheese dish
51 Vole (2 wds.)
55 Bliss
56 Low voices
57 Diminishes
58 Friar
59 Wharves
60 One and only
61 Indy champ — Luyendyk
62 Full of back talk
63 Loaf end
64 Genetic strand

Down
1 Kiwi language
2 Chowchow
3 Semiliquid
4 Chased away
5 Deserves
6 Potter's medium
7 Enameled metal
8 Moved jauntily
9 Exploiters
10 Talk, talk, talk (hyph.)
11 Luau strings
12 Free ticket
13 — Zeppelin
20 Not to mention
21 Dental photos (hyph.)
23 Like city lots
26 Not phony
27 Ancient Roman poet
29 Salinger heroine
30 Duck's feet
31 Wonka's creator
32 — vera lotion
33 Rents a U-Haul
34 Admirer
35 Weeper of myth
37 Tolerate
41 Safe to drink
43 Shiny
44 Mortarboard feature
46 Foul smells
47 Ivan's dollar
48 Borg of tennis
49 Old Greek colony
50 Little child
51 Glove compartment items
52 Charles Lamb
53 Netting
54 Plaintive reed
58 Sully

Yesterday's answer



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Pats defense has held its own in wild season

NFL playoffs. Bill Belichick's defense frustrated Andrew Luck last weekend.

The Patriots have been graded on a higher scale than the rest of the NFL due to their success in the early part of the 2000s. For proof, take into account that Bill Belichick fielded a question at his weekly press conference at Gillette Stadium Wednesday that began with, "Bill, it's been nearly 10 years since you won the Super Bowl."

This "drought" has a lot to do with the issues of Belichick's defense since the last title. In the playoffs of 2005, 2006 and 2007, the Rodney Harrison-Tedy Bruschi-Richard Seymour–led defenses appeared to simply be old. The 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012 defensive units could best be labeled as "transition groups."

As it stands now, this season's Pats defense has proven to be one of the more resilient groups of Belichick's 14-year run in Foxboro, highlighted by last Saturday's fourinterception night of the NFL's next big thing, Andrew Luck. Alfonzo Dennard picked off Luck twice, linebacker Dont'a Hightower grabbed one Luck throw and rookie linebacker Jamie Collins had his breakout performance while intercepting the Colts QB early in the fourth quarter.

In addition, safety Devin McCourty has regained the high level of play he displayed in his rookie campaign and has become the Pats' most reliable force in the secondary.

Not so surprisingly, the big pants left behind by Vince Wilfork have been the toughest to fill, but tackles Chris Jones and Sealver Siliga have drawn enough attention for defensive ends Chandler Jones and Rob Ninkovich to shine.

MATT BURKE
matthew.burke@metro.us

Bedridden

Patriots quarterback Tom Brady did not participate in Wednesday's practice due to an undisclosed illness and was "sent home" early in the day.

- Brady was fighting a cold last week leading up to the Colts game.

Patriots defensive end Chandler Jones has done plenty of celebrating this season as he recorded a team-high 11.5 sacks. / GETTY IMAGES

3 SPORTS

Richest pitcher ever

Dodgers' Kershaw signs deal

Two-time Cy Young Award winner Clayton Kershaw and the Dodgers agreed to the largest MLB contract for a pitcher in history Wednesday at seven years, $215 million. The lefty will earn more than $30 million annually. Last season Kershaw went 16-9 with a 1.83 ERA.

An ongoing saga

Smith's Knicks future in doubt after benching

Someone knows why J.R. Smith was benched against the Bobcats, but it's not him.

The enigmatic shooting guard was a healthy "did not play" Tuesday night in the Knicks' 108-98 loss in Charlotte.

"I hadn't the slightest clue [I wouldn't play]," Smith told reporters following the game. "I'm just worried about getting better. If I don't play, I go to the weight room or the court to get shots up."

ESPN reported Wednesday that Smith showed up late to a team meeting before the Bobcats game, and reportedly got into an argument with head coach Mike Woodson about playing time in overtime against the Suns on Monday.

SMITH IS AVERAGING 11.4 POINTS PER GAME. GETTY IMAGES

But if that's the case, Woodson wasn't talking about it Wednesday.

"I'm not kicking J.R. to the curb," Woodson told ESPN Radio. "J.R. is a big part of what we've done here, and he will remain a big part."

Smith was benched on Jan. 9 against the Heat after receiving a $50,000 fine for repeatedly trying to untie the shoelaces of opponents, even after being warned not to by his coach and the league. That benching also came as a surprise to Smith, though the Knicks won, 102-92.

There have been media reports the Knicks are looking to trade Smith — something they could do starting yesterday — but his contract and history of disciplinary issues makes a trade unlikely.

MARK OSBORNE

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NHL power rankings | by Rich Slate

No. 1

Ducks (35-8-5)

Things are great at Disneyland: The Ducks have won seven games in a row and they are still unbeaten in regulation at the Honda Center (19-0-2). Goaltender Jonas Hiller (23-4-4, .914 save percentage, 2.34 GAA, three shutouts) was named the NHL's second star of the week. Anaheim is tied with Chicago for the second-best goal differential in the NHL (plus-42).

No. 2

Blues (32-8-5)

The Blues lead the league in goal differential and anything less than a long run this spring will be a huge disappointment.

No. 3

Blackhawks (30-8-11)

The unthinkable happened last week as the Blackhawks suffered their first three-game losing streak. Chicago is 4-1-5 in its last 10.

No. 4

Penguins (33-12-2)

They are 7-2-1 in their last 10 games with a plus-40 goal differential. Barring some major injuries, they'll be the team to beat in the East.

No. 5

Sharks (29-12-6)

Getting snubbed for Team Canada should motivate Joe Thornton, who typically goes missing in the postseason.

No. 6

Avalanche (29-12-5)

The Avs have started to find a groove again with Semyon Varlamov (22-8-5, .927 save percentage) leading the way for the young but loaded team.

No. 7

Bruins (29-15-2)

As expected, the trip to California was painful (nine goals allowed in two losses). It won't get much easier as Boston heads back on the road tonight.

No. 8

Lightning (28-15-4)

The Lightning have become a legitimate contender in the East thanks to Martin St. Louis and Ben Bishop.

No. 9

Kings (28-14-5)

The Kings cleared up their goaltending situation by trading backup Ben Scrivens to Edmonton for a third-round pick in the 2014 draft.

No. 10

Canadiens (26-16-5)

The upcoming four-game road trip — Ottawa, Toronto, Pittsburgh and Detroit — will be tough. They have also potted 118 goals and allowed 111.

No. 11

Canucks (24-14-9)

The Canucks are staying in the same spot because they haven't really improved or gotten worse lately.

No. 12

Wild (25-19-5)

Now we're getting into some teams, like the Wild, with negative goal differentials (minus-4). We'll give them the benefit of the doubt.

No. 13

Flyers (24-19-5)

If the Flyers were a stock, you'd want to buy them at this point. They have their swagger back after going 7-3-0 in their last 10 games.

No. 14

Capitals (22-16-8)

Alex Ovechkin still leads the NHL in goals (33) but his crazy pace has slowed down with just three goals in the last 10 games.

No. 15

Leafs (23-20-5)

Toronto was falling apart, but Tuesday's 4-3 win in Boston could turn things around. Team USA's Phil Kessel has carried the Maple Leafs.

No. 16

Rangers (24-19-5)

Henrik Lundqvist emerged from his personal slump to earn the third star in the NHL last week. New York is 6-3-1 in its last 10 games.

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Offensive turnaround

Rangers getting contributions from Richards

Among the myriad reasons Rangers general manager Glen Sather hired Alain Vigneault to replace John Tortorella as head coach was his offensive-oriented mentality.

One player Vigneault believes has been key throughout the season has been Brad Richards. The center has eight points in the last six games.

"[He] felt good about himself [in camp] and just went out onto the ice and tried to play hard, and he's been doing that for us since day one," Vigneault said. **DENIS GORMAN**

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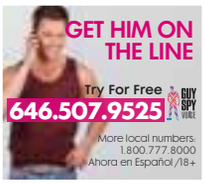

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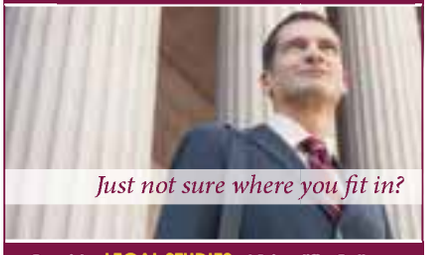

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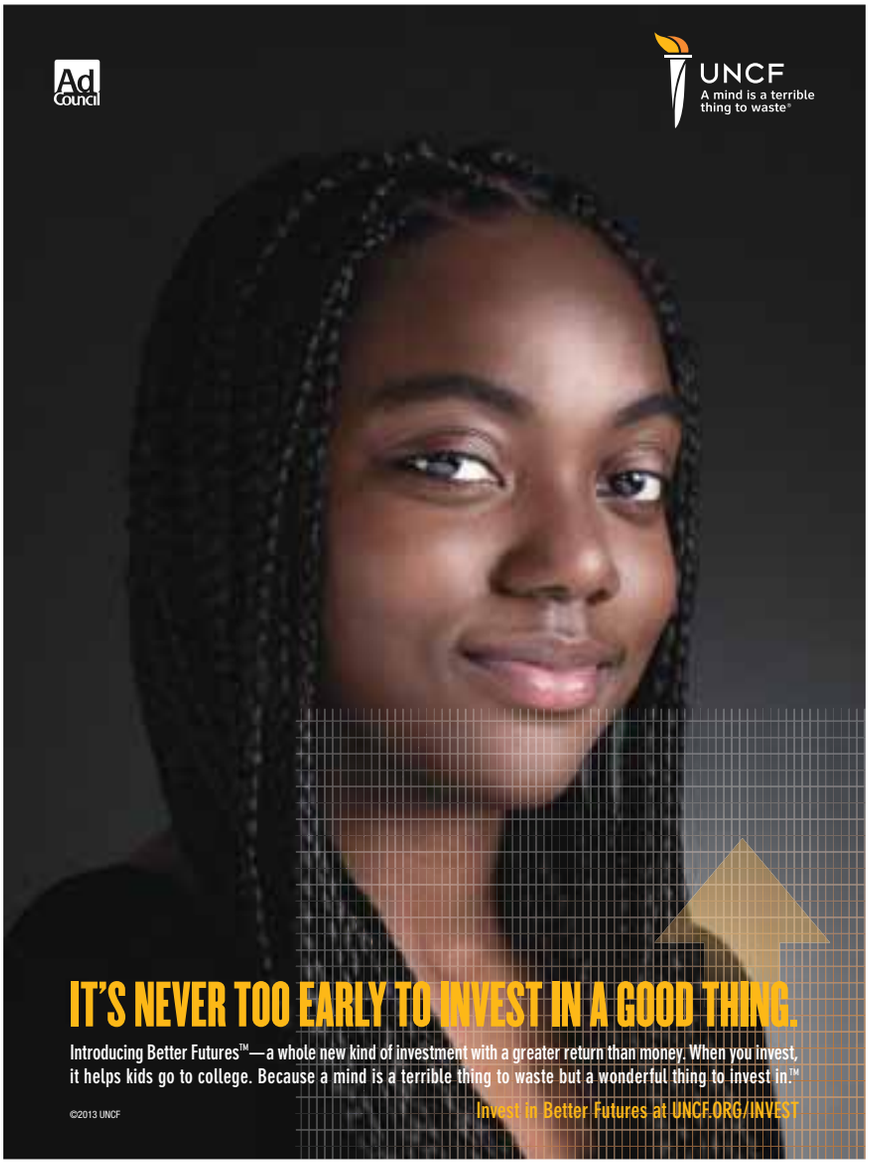
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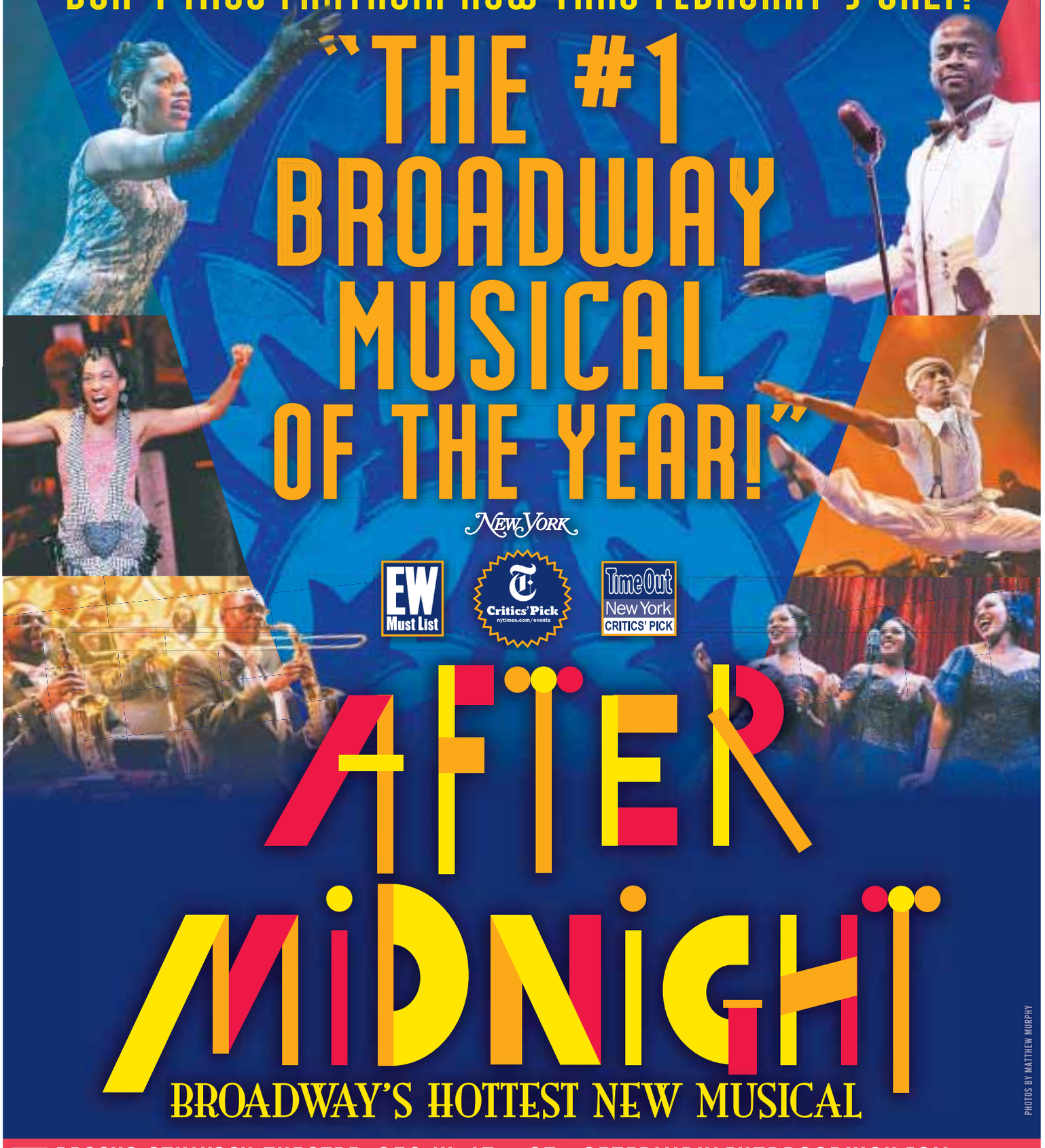

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